

## **Contemporary Japan**

Challenges for a World Economic Power in Transition

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## **A New Frontier in Art** From Calligraphy to Performance

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**Abstract** Over the last few years writing and calligraphic forms have seen a huge revival both in Japan and in East Asia developing as a new form of art. Works and installations using calligraphy, writing or typographic fonts and exploiting the richness of Asian languages have increased to the point where there's no exhibition or Biennial where art writing is missing. Following the classical pictorial models and formats, where calligraphy and painted images are considered as a unique form of expression, similarly, today calligraphic forms are used, mixed and overlapping with images both in contemporary graphic design and in photographic works. However, we can see also an increase in research through performative acts which recall the instinctive and free gesture of the *zenga* masters, at the same time adding at the same time to that approach the qualities of new media, technologies and internationalized art trends. The result is a completely new form of art expression originating from a continuous exchange between worldly active and complementary creative movements.

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### **1 The Great Influence of Zen Philosophy and Calligraphic Art on American and European Contemporary Artists**

Over the last few years we have seen growing interest all over the world from scholars, artists and creative people in the 'written word', understood as a sign, but also significance, and as writing in its most aesthetic form, i.e. calligraphy, right up to the boundaries of the more contemporary and experimental 'word art'. A huge revival of the calligraphic tradition has recently been recorded in Japan, too: many exhibitions and publications have been promoted by the main Japanese museums and calligraphic associations and their journals, which register thousands of members, both

professional and amateur,<sup>1</sup> as well as visitors in the case of exhibitions. In these contexts, calligraphy is promoted in the most traditional way, related to Chinese roots and to the classic tradition, although with some new experiments in materials and in the use of colours instead of pure black ink.

However, outside this official world, a far wider phenomenon, though less conscious, is moving towards the acceptance and use of calligraphy in infinite forms and materials, which are no longer merely paper, brush and ink, but involve new mechanical, digital and optical technologies leading to three-dimensional and virtual products and artistic creations.<sup>2</sup>

Traditionally, we associate calligraphy with Oriental, Chinese and Japanese cultures and immediately imagine a sheet of paper on which strokes of black ink are traced with a brush, using a natural and instinctive movement of the calligrapher's hand and body. Thus we see calligraphy not only as a sign, but as a gesture as well. In this sense the most attractive calligraphic work was the eighteenth century *zenga* masters' ink painting on scrolls, which was produced inside the Buddhist monasteries not as an art product, but as a spiritual exercise linked to the path of meditation, together with disciplines such as the tea ceremony (*cha no yu*), the art of flower arrangement (*chabana*), the art of dry rock gardens (*karesansui*), the martial arts (*budō*). Calligraphy was the aesthetic means for transporting individual and conceptually powerful characters into reality by means of the briefest of phrases, each one line long (*ichigyōsho*), in a process of self knowledge, or by using pictorial elements linked to them – a form of teaching that could not be expressed in words or according to common logic but was only attainable by the disciple intuitively through meditation.

In this sense it is important to mention the terminology used to identify writing. Interestingly, while in the Euro-American countries the term calligraphy stems from the concept of 'beautiful writing' (from the Greek: *kalos*=beautiful; *graphia*=writing), in which *graphia* is also the common denominator in photography (from the Greek: *phos*=light; *graphia*=writing), and graphic thus emphasizing the aspect of sign in the visual arts, in Japan the term for calligraphy is *shodō*, which means 'the Way of calligraphy', that is commonly mistranslated as the 'art of calligraphy'. In the word 書道 *shodō*, calligraphy is considered as a discipline in the same vein as 茶道 *sadō* (the Way of tea), 武道 *budō* (the Way of samurai), 香道 *kōdō* (the Way of incense), all related to the culture of Zen Buddhism, and it has nothing

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1 Some main publications: Shimatani 2013a, 2013b; plus the two exhibitions «SHO1» and «SHO2» promoted by the Mainichi Shodō Association at the Musée des arts asiatiques Guimet in 2012 and 2013.

2 Two main artists have developed and affirmed this research in word art internationally: the Chinese Xu Bing through installations, and the Japanese Shin'ichi Maruyama through photography and video. See: Elliott, Tomii 2011; Maruyama 2009.

in common with the Japanese term used for photography 写真 (*shashin*)<sup>3</sup> or for graphic design, which was introduced in the Fifties and where the English term is still used today.<sup>4</sup>

The example of calligraphy connected with the Zen Buddhist teaching is of basic importance, especially seen in terms of the later developments of the art in relation to the Euro-American influences. In fact the latter developments have led to deviations not connected to the original schools and teachings, giving rise to completely new works of art both for the America and Europe and for Japan, inspired by fullness, freedom and the abstract nature of the calligraphic sign, the balance between solids and voids and the irregularity of forms. They are also new in terms of the supports used – paper rather than fabric, pigments, black ink rather than colour – as well as the formats – length of the horizontal scroll or concertina-type folding rather than the simple quadrangular shape, right up to the musical transposition of the spatial void (*kūkan* 空間) into silence (*ma* 間). There were many thinkers and artists who underwent a process of inner transformation and consequently transformation of their art by entering into contact first with Zen philosophy and then with art from the Nineteen Fifties onwards. This came about first and foremost thanks to the lectures that Professor and Master Daisetsu Teitarō Suzuki (1870-1966) held in many American universities and to his early translations of the Buddhist texts into English.<sup>5</sup> James Lee Byars (1932-1997),<sup>6</sup> Mark Tobey (1890-1976),<sup>7</sup> Yves Klein (1928-1962),<sup>8</sup> Henry Michaux (1899-1984),<sup>9</sup> John Cage (1912-1992),<sup>10</sup> to name but a few, opened the way to a new concept of hybrid calligraphy that combined East Asian as well as Euro-American art peculiarities.

This phenomenon is by no means at an end and is repeated, in the other opposite direction and naturally on a different basis today in Japan or by Japanese artists, involving in particular female, student, calligraphy clubs

3 写真 literally 'copy' and 'true', the term has been adopted to indicate photography in the 1860's. See: Ozawa Takeshi 1997, pp. 24-26

4 It was Yūsaku Kamekura (1915-1997), considered the 'boss' of Japanese contemporary graphic design, to substitute the Japanese term 図案 (*zuan*) with the English one グラフィック・デザイン *gurafikku dezain* (graphic design) on the occasion of the exhibition «Grafic '55» at the Takashimaya Department Store where, for the first time, printed posters were exhibited instead of sketches designed by hand.

5 For a general survey see: Suzuki 1969.

6 Power 1994, p. 280.

7 Pearlman 2012, p. 38

8 McEvilley 2010, p. 28

9 Parish 2007, pp. 159-161; Michaux 2006.

10 Cage 1961, p. 303.

but also artists like Shin'ichi Maruyama who captures calligraphic gestures traced in the air with giant pens using high-resolution photographic technology and without leaving any trace on paper, apart from the photographic snapshot of the ink expanding in the air. In Maruyama's case, too, Zen inspiration is explicitly mentioned: he refers to the beauty of *wabi-sabi* aesthetic, the unrepeatable nature of the gesture, the inconsistency of the black liquid that finds its way on paper as in the void, to the importance given to the void (*ma* 間).<sup>11</sup>

## 2 Image and Text Relationship in Classical Japanese Painting

Having established this, it is clear that discussing calligraphy in Japan means discussing writing and image without distinction. Japanese culture is considered an unrivalled culture of packaging, where form and image cannot be separated and consequently the relationship between art and design and between visual arts and writing is also an intimate one. It is a relationship that finds its origin in literary and pictorial classics which we describe here along the lines of two main qualities.

### 2.1 Synchronic Relationship

A 'synchronic' image/text relationship – where the text can be a poetic verse or a calligraphic transcription of a classical text – is expressed in the format of long illustrated handscrolls (絵巻物 *emakimono*) or hanging painted scrolls (掛け物 *kakemono*). In this kind of work calligraphy and image are not independent, but a unique indivisible creation.

One example is the illustrated handscroll «Moon, Lespedeza and Ivy. Calligraphy of Poetries from *Kokinwakashū*»<sup>12</sup> by Hon'ami Kōetsu (1558-1637, calligraphy) and Tawaraya Sōtatsu (?-1643?, painting) which represents the kind of work in which the story or composition develops continuously along the entire surface of the handscroll with no interruption: verses of poetry written vertically from right to left are irregularly juxtaposed or alternated with paintings of natural elements such as the moon and grass. Thus, the synchronic relation between text and image manifests itself as an overlapping of the calligraphic text with the painted image used as decoration, creating a fusion and a balance between the two elements through the rhythm

<sup>11</sup> See the artist official website: <http://www.Shinichimaruyama.com/statement>.

<sup>12</sup> 『月に萩・蔦下絵古今集和歌巻』 *Tsuki ni hagi, tsuta shita-e «Kokinwakashū» maki* (Moon, Lespedeza and Ivy: Calligraphy of Poetries from the *Kokinwakashū*), Hon'ami Kōetsu and Tawaraya Sōtatsu. Early seventeenth century, 34,3 × 928,6 cm. Ink, silver and gold on silk. Idemitsu Museum of Arts. See: Calza, Menegazzo 2009, pp. 185, 359.

of signs and voids and the variation in form and thickness of calligraphic characters which recall the beauty and movement of a sheet of music.

A different example of this relationship between text/image is the hanging scroll «Yatsushashi»<sup>13</sup> by Ogata Kenzan (1633-1743), which refers to one of those ‘famous locations’ (名所 *meisho*) celebrated in the visual arts and alluding to literary and poetic references, in this case the Eightfold bridge described in *The Tales of Ise* (伊勢物語 *Ise monogatari*) of the ninth-tenth century (McCullough 1968, pp. 74-75). In works such as this painting, synchrony between text and image takes the form of as a coupling between the painted subject and the calligraphic text, which complete each other, here with gentle calligraphy running over the bridge like water in a stream. The best example of this characteristic, however, is 俳画 *haiga*, a form of painting composed by *haiku* poetry (俳句) and painting (画 *ga*), in which the image is evocative and not always explicitly linked to the subject of the poetry.

## 2.2 Diachronic Relationship

A ‘diachronic’ image/text relationship, as is to be seen in some illustrated handscrolls and in illustrated books (絵本 *e-hon*), alternates calligraphic parts with painted ones.

The «Genji monogatari illustrated handscroll»<sup>14</sup> is the most representative of this kind of work: today it is divided into single sheets for conservation purposes, so the paintings and calligraphic texts are separated, but originally each chapter was a sequence of calligraphic texts from the Heian period novel by the Court Lady Murasaki Shikibu, alternating with images which illustrate them.

## 3 Image and Text Relationship in Contemporary Japanese Visual Arts

Bearing this in mind, it is interesting to note that even in contemporary Japanese art production, where the fusion of multiple visual forms and media is the new frontier, the same absence of separation between word and image can be found as we saw in classical painting. This is a unity that has also developed far from the limit of the bi-dimensional pictorial

13 『八橋図』 *Yatsushashi-zu* (Eightfold Bridge), Ogata Kenzan. Eighteenth century, 28,4 × 36,6 cm. Ink, colour and gold on paper, hanging scroll. Important Cultural Property, Agency for Cultural Affairs. See: Calza, Menegazzo 2009, pp. 262, 366.

14 『源氏物語絵巻』 *Genji Monogatari emaki*, Murasaki Shikibu. Ink and colour on paper, twelfth century. Actually the handscroll's surviving painted and calligraphed sheets are collected in the Gotoh Museum in Tokyo and in the Tokugawa Art Museum in Nagoya. To find a recent study on the handscroll see: NHK Nagoya 2006.

surface to find new forms in three-dimensional composition or through new media. Photography in particular is one of the media which since the 1980's has improved and spread throughout the creative world, being used not only as a discipline in its own right but also applied to other fields such as graphic design, video art and games, and TV commercials. The boundaries between all the different media are continuously destroyed and reconstructed to bring new forms of expression into being. What remains, however, is the fusion, this time not between painting and calligraphy, but between photography/graphic design and an infinite range of typographic characters.<sup>15</sup>

Digital technology is the way through which pictorial tradition is transformed into a contemporary photo-graphic language. The variety and richness of characters and styles of the Japanese written language, formed by *kanji*, *kana* and the Roman alphabet, represents a great source to draw upon for playing and joking with new, different and mixed fonts in the same work; the brush stroke, too, is transformed in a widely varying range of thicknesses and rhythms applied to typographic characters which can similarly appear as slim and cursive, square and bold. In the same way, the creative freedom applied to the positioning and developing of calligraphic texts in classical pictorial works can also be found to persist in contemporary photo-graphic works.

### 3.1 Synchronic Relationship

A 'synchronic' image/text relationship can be seen in commercial graphic posters with a wide range of variations: For Shiseido's advertising campaign Masayoshi Nakajo uses overlapping, mixing, as well as an apparent disorder of *hiragana*, *kanji* and *rōmaji* in the typographic text to play with a photographic image that depicts the real subject, a line of models wearing dresses in different urban and country locations with text overlaid (see Tokyo Type Directors Club 2008, pp. 100-101, no. 114): a similar concept to the illustrated handscroll by Sōtatsu and Kōetsu. A different example is the work done by Tsuguya Inoue and Atarashi Ryōta to promote the book of

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15 Some examples of Japanese graphic design works can be found in Menegazzo 2010. But, apart from Japan, also several art installations by Chinese artists confirm this interest: Pan Gongkai's «Snow melting in lotus» at the Venice Biennale 2011 mixed traditional ink monochrome Chinese characters with Latin alphabet ones to make a video of a tunnel with a calligraphic falling water; Tsang Kin-wah's «The Fifth Seal», shown at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo in 2012, is a video installation using computer technologies to run texts in Chinese and Latin characters on the walls thus creating a space made by words. Moreover, the Japanese videogame 大神 *Ōkami*, produced by Clover Studio and distributed in 2006, presents the game using the form of a handscroll unrolling to the player and narrating the events accompanying the video-images with a text in *hiragana*.

photography by Eiichirō Sakata.<sup>16</sup> In this case, a digital photographic image is transformed into a fantastic construction in which text and image blend even more successfully to create a single sign and significance: a photo of a cluster of ladybugs in flight has been added to the title of the book, in a white row of Roman typographic characters, thus forming a track on the back of each insect which evokes their sound and movement in the sky. This example is much closer to Kenzan's painting of the Eightfold bridge and stream, where image and words intermingle to the point that the writing is used mostly as a sign to become itself an image.

### 3.2 Diachronic Relationship

The 'diachronic' image/text relationship is well represented by the multiple posters by the designer Kaoru Kasai and the calligrapher Kōji Kinouchi for the Oolong Tea Suntory campaign.<sup>17</sup> The posters are double the normal size and present a diachronic relationship between the written part and the photographic image. The horizontal format recalls the surface of an illustrated handscroll, alternating real photo-images of the product with typographic, brushlike calligraphic texts done by a professional calligrapher. The first campaign for black Oolong tea «Alarming to Neutral Fat» is clearly directed at a male consumer: a couple of male portraits are followed by bold and vigorous calligraphic characters, *kanji* and *hiragana*, starting from up-right to bottom-left and finishing with a small bottle of tea substituting the red seal of the calligrapher usually present in a traditional painting. The second campaign for Oolong tea entitled «My Big Sister Eats A Lot» is directed at a female audience: two portraits of girls, seemingly a younger and an elder sister, are followed by slim, elegant, cursive calligraphic characters typical of Heian period women's calligraphy. In this work technological means and traditional elements, like the choice of a long horizontal surface and the common feeling for calligraphy, are brought together to produce a strong and immediate commercial effect promoting the two types of tea to different categories of potential clients.<sup>18</sup>

Some masterpieces of graphic design show the most impressive result of this fusion of image and writing, as they use calligraphy and writing as

16 Sakata 2006. To see more works by Inoue Tsuguya: Nakazawa 2010.

17 See the Tokyo Type Directors Club website: [http://tdctokyo.org/eng/?award=07\\_kaoru-kasai-koji-kinouchi](http://tdctokyo.org/eng/?award=07_kaoru-kasai-koji-kinouchi).

18 To read Kaoru Kasai's words when he was presented with the TDC Award 2007 for this campaign, see the Tokyo Type Directors Club website: [http://tdctokyo.org/eng/?award=07\\_kaoru-kasai-koji-kinouchi](http://tdctokyo.org/eng/?award=07_kaoru-kasai-koji-kinouchi).

their main subject or, better, as an image in itself in an intimate relation of form and significance.

Ryūichi Yamashiro (1920-1997)'s poster «Forests, Woods, Trees» (森林木 *Mori, hayashi, ki*) designed in 1955 depicts a forest merely by using the pictographic character which in form and meaning refers to 'tree' (木 *ki*). Yamashiro uses the most simple concept but the most effective one for exploiting Chinese pictographic characters, repeating the same character: doubled it means 'wood' (林 *hayashi*) and with a third character added on the top it means 'forest' (森 *mori*). The repetition of the form of these signs together with their meanings creates an immediate perception of a typographic forest that still today remains a masterpiece of postwar design.<sup>19</sup>

Among his various studies on typographic fonts, in 1980 Ikkō Tanaka (1930-2002) created the poster «True» (真 *shin*) (Nara Prefectural Museum 2011, p. 32 no. 96) in which, as in a *zenga* painting, the calligraphic sign of the *kanji* 真 is traced by hand to fill the entire surface of the poster, thus becoming the subject of the work and used both as a sign and as a meaning. Tanaka thus transforms the practice traditionally linked to Zen painting into a contemporary graphic work through the use of colors and some more graphic and precise strokes (see the horizontal white line of 真) in contrast with the rest of the character which is hand painted.

In a different way, but similar to the construction of Yamashiro, is the poster realized by Norito Shinmura in 2005 entitled «Global Warming»,<sup>20</sup> which shows the great concern of this designer for the environment, an issue close to his heart due to his origins, since he was born in a family where all his brothers are fishermen. A typographic text is written in black characters at the top of the poster making the reader understand this is a very specific message on global warming and its effect on rising sea levels. The last rows of the text are about to be submerged by water, photographically rendered, and the other characters sink into the water, bending, rolling up and floating upside-down like light objects.

Going back to photography and to a more popular use of the medium, it is useful to remember that the fusion of writing and image has become a real social phenomenon since the 90's with the massive launch of *purikura* プリクラ (abbreviation of 'print club') machines, devices which produce mini stamp-like photos that are shot and collected especially by teenage girls. Young girls take portraits of themselves with their closest friends setting

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19 Yamashiro 2003, p. 57. In 2001 at the North Carolina Museum of Art the Chinese artist and calligrapher Xu Bing created the installation «Du Shenjing» (Reading Landscape), with a similar concept to Yamashiro's poster, but going beyond the surface to develop three-dimensional characters in space, each corresponding to natural elements such as a tree 木, a stream 川, a mountain 山 and combining to form a landscape. Some views of the installation can be found in Tomii 2010, pp. 218-219.

20 To see this and other works: Shinmura, Niwano 2010, p. 9.



them against the fantastic, or even better, kitsch backgrounds offered by the machines, and writing over the image itself or around it to express their more intimate thoughts and words, then collected on the small pages of *purikura* albums (プリ長 *purichō*). The strength of this type of photography resides precisely in the interactivity of the medium, the wide possibility to modify, play with and retouch the image, adding messages, symbols and colours by hand on a very small surface.<sup>21</sup> However, it is writing that transforms the photographic image into a special and unique one, linking it to a precise moment or feeling to be shared with chosen people. It is maybe this very intimate and private aspect that gave this type of photography such great resonance amongst female teenagers. It developed into a sort of contemporary personal diary, just as happened in the Heian period (794-1185) with handwritten diaries (*nikki*) and later painted accounts on handscrolls (*emaki*) compiled by Court Ladies, but today expressed in the form of a photographic record of private events and life with the addition of handwritten intimate and frivolous thoughts (Menegazzo 2014, pp. 1035-1037).

To this phenomenon, basically a form of entertainment – a progressively more serious and professional photographic production, later dubbed ‘girlie photography’ (女の子の写真 *onna no ko no shashin*),<sup>22</sup> filled the bookstores with photographic series, in the form of books and albums where personal thoughts were added in typographic or calligraphic style in between or on top of the photo-images. The great photographer Araki Nobuyoshi himself used to express his more profound feelings, for example fear after having discovered he had cancer, in his photographic series entitled «Sora2 – Isaku» (空2 – 遺作 2TheSky, Araki 2009) in which photos of the sky are traced over by brush and colours using rough, thick calligraphic characters meaning ‘death’ or ‘cancer’.

To conclude these brief comments on calligraphic text as used in graphic design and photography a recent trend should be mentioned, which has spread into the new visual media capturing the interest of amateurs at an international level. It is known as 俳写 (*haisha*),<sup>23</sup> a term which put together the meaning of *haiku* (俳句) and *shashin* (写真), creating an art form which brings together brief poems and photography following the classical Japanese pictorial model of 俳画 (*haiga*) but using contemporary media. The English word for this trend is ‘photopoetry’, the Italian is ‘fotopoesia’, and around this virtual artistic production many websites, together with blogs and international contests and prizes have been created. Works of

21 For a sociological study on *purikura* see: Chalfen, Murui 2001, pp. 220-250.

22 They were presented for the first time in the exhibition and catalogue curated by Iizawa, Kōtarō 1999. See also: Dipietro 2001

23 Several webpages are devoted to *Haisha*. For the *Haisha* association: <http://www.50pa.com/haisya.html>.

*haisha* and photo-poetry use photographic images but also video-products instead of painting, to over-written poetic texts in Japanese, English or Italian. The interesting aspect of these amateur compositions is that in the passage from *haisha* to photopoetry we witness an extension of the concept of *haiga* in Euro-American culture, a sort of 'westernization' and actualization of this brief and peculiarly Japanese composition. *Haiku* is substituted by poetry, so both the length and characters of the verses are transformed into Euro-American languages and the corresponding alphabet, while the image has shifted from painting to digital photography. In this process it is obvious that the original meaning of *haiku*, strictly related to literary tradition and a special sensibility towards nature, is going to be lost, but at the same time it absorbs and expresses new meanings related to each Country's culture and tradition. Thus, as it happened in the Fifties with Zen teachings being absorbed by artists on the West Coast of the USA, what has emerged here is a completely new artistic production that is no longer Japanese, but is exotic enough and attractive to a foreign public because it conserves the peculiar trait of 'Japaneseness' which, thanks to globalized web media, can be accessed and enjoyed freely and by anybody, leading to the consequent spread of what we can consider a new *Japonisme* of the digital era.

#### 4 New Japanese Forms of Calligraphy Influenced by Euro-American Performative Art: the Case of the 'Shodō Girls'

The counterpart of this *Japonisme* diffusion through an international network reveals the big influence that, on the other side, Euro-American performing arts and globalization of media have on Japanese tradition and disciplines inside Japan. As just mentioned at the beginning of this essay, once again in the history of Japanese art, a new trend is starting and being conducted by the female world, in this case by young girls called the 'shodō girls' (書道ギャール *shodō gyāru*). A very enthusiastic and energetic movement sprang from the calligraphy clubs in the high schools that has rapidly gathered fans and new performers also thanks to the fact that it has been chosen as subject of a television series and in 2009 it became a film titled *Shodō Girls - Watashitachi no Koshien* by the director Ryūichi Inomata (*Shodō gāruzu!! Watashitachi no Kōshien* 2010).

Based on facts, the film depicts a group of high school girls who revitalize calligraphy through unconventional, modern means: simultaneously drawing multiple characters with giant brushes and colours onto a massive piece of paper, dressing kimonos or uniforms specifically made for the event, while dancing choreographies on J-pop music. The result is a real calligraphic performance, on which each school's club competes with the others once a year, during what is called 書道パフォーマンス甲子園 *Shodō*

*pafōmansu Kōshien* (Shodō performance Kōshien) performed in big sport spaces with a committee of professional judges. This kind of calligraphic performance on giant paper is not new in the Japanese art tradition – the same Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), master of *ukiyo-e* painting, did it as well as performance on the smallest surface of a single rice – but what is new here is the content each team writes, certainly not traditional *shodō*, but a colorful, enjoying form of writing art responding to the contemporary *kawaii* pop-trend.<sup>24</sup>

If academic calligraphy considers this kind of performance a destruction of the original ‘Way of calligraphy’, based on discipline and on following historical masters’ styles, despite this formal consideration I feel this phenomenon more like a profound transformation (as it was for female diaries in the Heian period or female photography in 1990’s). A traditional expression of Japanese culture finds a way to become attractive to, and to be rediscovered by young generations mixing with their languages. And more, creating a new form of art that is no more Japanese calligraphy, but a new thing: that takes the form of art performance, that means more generally an international form of art appealing both internationally and, for this reason, even more appealing also to young Japanese generations watching and searching for foreign models. A new art result derived from globalization or a form of ‘self-Japonisme’?

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